# Toward the Omniscient Maker of Tales: The Dynamics of the Self and the Whole in the Early Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin

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> There is the old English story of the dialogue between John and Thomas, in which it is always John's John talking, and Thomas' Thomas; for John speaks only to John's Thomas, and Thomas only to Thomas' John, while the real John, the real Thomas, and the whole tale of their conversation can be seen and heard only by their omniscient Maker. And this, alas, is something more than a poor jest, for it is pretty nearly the literal truth.
>
> Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*

It may be doubted whether this philosophical joke cited by Max Scheler in his *Nature of Sympathy*[1] effectively exemplifies Scheler's own position, but what is certain is that it epitomizes the basic concern of the early thought of Mikhail Bakhtin. Indeed, Bakhtin's early assessment of the dynamic of self and other informed everything he did afterwards; all his later concepts and elaborations bear witness to the early focus of his investigations—the profound and vibrant intersection of ethics, aesthetics, and religion. All of Bakhtin's "great narratives" are to a significant extent related to the central issue of his early philosophical anthropology—the position of the human subject in its highly interdependent environment, the latter understood as a meticulously structured volitional network of the subject's relationship both to other persons and to material creation.

All the modal transformations of Bakhtin's thought (from ethics to linguistics, from the concept of polyphony to the notion of the text) share the following essential dynamic: every concept is (explicitly or obliquely) set in an architectonics which has its own personalized axiological axis—that of the non-indifferent human being. It is my contention that this ethically founded architectonics of

being should not be viewed in exclusively moral terms, but also in the context of Bakhtin's fundamentally holistic worldview. To explicate the *dominanta*s of young Bakhtin's thought, as well as to reassert their formative importance for his later work, I shall discuss several of his early texts: "Art and Answerability," *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," and "The Problem of Content, Material and Form." I will not be juxtaposing Bakhtin's ideas with recognizable socio-cultural models; rather, I will be discussing the relevance of his early concepts within the wider context of a "life ideology,"[2] with an emphasis on his holistic view of the differentiating world.

Since the text's publication in 1986, the significance of Bakhtin's first ambitious treatise, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, has transcended the perimeter of intra-Bakhtinian studies. There is now a consensus that this text, initially perceived as a treatise on ethics, has a much broader scope. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is a truly multi-faceted work; a daring reassessment of Western ontology, it also elaborates an idiosyncratic evaluative theory, offers some penetrating instances of literary criticism, and engages in subtle theological deliberations.

The philosophical intention of the treatise follows two distinctly separate, yet related, trajectories: a primary ethical demand for a non-indifferent, responsible subject, and a derivative, but equally important, authorial imperative for unity and wholesomeness.[3] The ethical intention of the treatise is manifest in Bakhtin's search for the roots of responsibility. In this search, he modifies slightly the third postulate of Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, which enjoins the moral subject to make a free choice betwen good and evil.[4] Positing the notion of responsibility (not to be equated with answerability) as fundamental to his ethics, Bakhtin seems to leave the subject's position negotiable, postulating that there is no other imperative for a person to act but responsibility itself. The only motivation for responsibility to become manifest and trigger the act lies in the uniqueness of the subject's position in the world:

> I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never-repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else. . . . In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located in the once-occurrent time and once-occurrent space of once occurrent Being. . . . That which can be done by me can never be

> done by anyone else. The uniqueness or singularity of present-on-hand Being is compellently obligatory. (Bakhtin, *Philosophy* 40)[5]

Bakhtin distances himself from both formal and material ethics: what makes me a responisble being comes from the sphere of real life, real existence. My responsibility is not conditioned by any kind of imperative, or by the content of the good itself, no matter how indisputable this content may be. This non-conditional stance on Bakhtin's part does not presuppose relativism. Rather, it relies on the proposition that, if I am a responsible being, I am not to have recourse to any type of "alibi in Being." The reason I am not allowed to have an "alibi in Being" is my *irreplaceable* position in Being:

It is this affirmation of my non-alibi in Being that constitutes the basis of my life being actually and completely given as well as its being actually and completely projected as something-yet-to-be-achieved. It is only my non-alibi in Being that transforms an empty possibility into an actual answerable act or deed. (Bakhtin, *Philosophy* 42)

If we follow the logical unfolding of Bakhtin's argumentation in the treatise, we can perceive the true hierarchy of his philosophical propositions. The subject's responsibility is, undoubtedly, the core of Bakhtin's philosophy of the act, but the ultimate horizon of his ethical project is in the (personalized) overcoming of the "fundamental split" in the totality of human culture—the split between the given "world of culture" and the actual "world of life." In other words, Bakhtin's deep agenda is holistic. Although the treatise might be seen as focused solely on individual ethics, the climactic meaning of individual action, as Bakhtin sees it, resides in the individual's partaking of the Being-as-Event (a participation that is, at the same time, a founding act). The subject's ultimate (i.e., ownmost) activity—the validation of his/her existence—is seen not in terms of concrete social practice, but as an "entering-the-communion" (in Russian, "priobshchenie," which means, literally, "entering a unity"). This unity, which appears as the moral act's final aim, constitutes the aforementioned holistic world:

> At the basis of an actual deed is a *being-in-communion* with the once-occurent unity; what is answerable does not dissolve in what is specialized (politics), otherwise what we have is not an answerable deed but a technical or instrumental action" (Bakhtin, *Philosophy* 42; emphasis added).[6]

The same ethical stance profoundly informs Bakhtin's approach to culture. Thus, in "The Problem of Content," Bakhtin brings his holistic view to bear on the assessment of contemporary poetics. His main objection to the Russian Formalists does not concern their effort to explore literature on scientific grounds (Bakhtin was an advocate of an aesthetic reevaluation of literature), but their method of achieving "literary scientificity" by isolating literature from the wholeness of human culture. Maintaining that every word in literature is inscribed with layers of social and cultural usages non-indifferent to us, he situates the realm of aesthetics inside the grid of human culture.[7] The key difference between the material object of art, as conceptualized by the Russian Formalists, and the aesthetic object in Bakhtin's understanding, is that the latter participates in (and is constituted by) a network of connections to the socio-cultural and cognitive environment.

> The basic feature of the aesthetic that sharply distinguishes it from cognition and performed action is its receptive, positively accepting character, which enters into the work (or, to be exact, into the aesthetic object) and there becomes an indispensable constitutive moment. In this sense, we can say that in actuality life is found not only outside art but in it, within it, in all the fullness of its value-bearing weightiness—social, political, cognitive, and so on. (Bakhtin, "Problem" 278)

This leads Bakhtin to the firm belief that no sphere of human existence is detached from its environment. Every reductionism (i.e., any specialization of disciplines), especially if applied to the humanities,[8] exacts Bakhtin's disapproval: he denounces any mechanistic transposition of positivist patterns of thinking into the domain of humanistic studies. When considering the verbal arts and culture, Bakhtin's position is as comprehensive as it is straightforward: in his creative activity, the verbal artist never deals with intact and neutral material; the world he encounters has been already evaluated—practically (in Bakhtin, cognition and ethics necessarily precede aesthetics), as well as aesthetically (in other works of literature):

> Besides the reality of both cognition and performed action, the artist of the word also finds literature to be already on hand: it is necessary for him to fight against

> or for old literary forms, to make use of them, to combine them, to overcome their resistance or to find support in them. But, at the heart of all this movement and struggle within the bounds of purely literary context, there is a more essential, determining primary struggle with the reality of action and cognition. . . . (Bakhtin, "Problem" 284)[9]

I have already mentioned the importance of the axiological sphere for the constitution of the subject in Bakhtin. In the living subject, axiological activity and existence overlap without a remainder: since existing means being responsible, the subject, insofar as s/he exists, is always evaluating and being evaluated. Here, we should distinguish between the notion of evaluation in early Bakhtin and a more habitual understanding of criticism. From Bakhtin's perspective, the subject's evaluative activity is an emotional-volitional act directed at the outside world, the acknowledgement of his/her affinity with the world's being (*Philosophy* 33-34). The recognition of what is outside the subject brings a new recuperation of the world, neither solely axiological nor moral, in a narrow sense, but holistically accented. On its ulitmate (perhaps, utopian) horizon, this recuperation becomes the creative-dynamic *redemption* of the world, at the center of which stands the non-indifferent subject, the subject that is, *eo ipso*, expected to act, making his surroundings into the world-in-becoming, the world as a permanent, interdependently ongoing Event. Significantly, Bakhtin introduces eminently theological terminology in order to describe the relationship between the subject and the world. The balance between the subject's self-affirmation and his/her disappearance in Being is understood as a unity "without confusion, without separation": "My active deed . . . is not simply an affirmation of myself or simply an affirmation of actual Being, but a non-fused yet undivided affirmation of myself in Being. . . ." (Bakhtin, *Philosophy* 41).

Let us now return from the world endowed with evaluative creativity to its "prime mover": the inner world of the responsible subject. The constitution of this ethical (and, thus, also aesthetic) entity is highly dependent upon the act of crossing-over, extending over a boundary. The interrelated concepts of "boundary" and the "boundless" are absolutely integral to Bakhtin's vision of the world as both a realm of moral action and a domain of culture. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, we read:

> [My] actually performed act on the basis of my non-

> alibi in Being . . . is actually set into immediate proximity to the ultimate bounds of Being as event. . . . However full of content might be or however concrete and individual a deed might be, in their small yet actual domain they participate in the boundless whole. (54)

In "The Problem of Content" Bakhtin discusses the sphere of culture in similar terms:

> A cultural domain has no inner territory. It is located entirely upon boundaries, boundaries intersect it everywhere, passing through each of its constituent features. The systematic unity of culture passes into the atoms of cultural life. . . . Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries. . . . Separated by abstraction from these boundaries, it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant; it degenerates and dies.
>
> In this sense, we can speak about the concrete systematicness of every cultural phenomenon, of every individual cultural act, about its *autonomous participation* or its *participative autonomy* (274; emphasis in the original).

Bakhtin challenges the essentially static notion of identity characteristic of Western thinking, classical as well as modern. In the artistic act, no less than in the ethical act, the subject resides in that movement through which s/he extends over the boundaries of his/her identity. With this notorious application of the Husserlian dialectics of "horizon" and "surroundings," Bakhtin was among the first in Western culture to attend (however idiosyncratically) to a number of delicate issues: the interrelationship between a fractal and a whole, between the individual and the social, and—what is of exceptional importance for his understanding of culture—between different *series* within a (social or any other) whole.[10]

In his late fragments, dealing with the imperative for "exactness" in the humanities, Bakhtin returns to the issue of the boundary:

> Each word (each sign) of the text exceeds its boundaries. Any understanding is a correlation of a given text with other texts. . . [Philosophy] begins where precise science ends and a *different science* begins.

> It can be defined as the metalanguage of all sciences (and of all kinds of cognition and consciousness). ("Methodology" 161; emphasis added).

The "exactness" or, rather, "precision," found in philosophy and other humanitarian disciplines is, according to Bakhtin, inherently different from the one mandated by the so-called "exact" sciences. The point at which the former diverge from the latter is the deeply humanistic imperative for "surmounting the otherness of the other without transforming him/her into purely one's own" ("Methodology" 170). The same possibility holds for the other end of the duality: the "I" could transcend its selfhood without losing its subjectivity. Bakhtin's subject thus dwells on the borderline between the self and the outer world, constituted in a union "without confusion, without separation."[11]

With the term "outsideness" (or, "being-outside," exotopy),[12] Bakhtin strives to convey precisely this displaced—in relation to its perceived boundaries—being of the subject. The displacement is made manifest, once again, as Bakhtin theorizes the dynamic between literary author and hero. There is an inherent discrepancy between the levels occupied by these two personae—the "inside" of the hero and the "outside" of the author: the author is in possession of a surplus of evaluative consciousness, by means of which he is able to *finalize* the hero. For Bakhtin, the seizure of any value, its finalization as value proper, always comes from the outside; evaluative self-consciousness, a proper apprehension of one's own values is, strictly speaking, impossible, it is a contradiction in terms.[13] The individual ethical act, as we have seen, is grounded in the subject's recognition of a being outside his/her self. In the architectonics of artistic creation, this being-outside is embodied by the author:

> The aesthetic *subiectum's* (the author's, the contemplator's) unique place in Being, the point from which his aesthetic activity (his objective love of a concrete human being) starts out or issues, has only one determination: his being situated outside all of the moments in the architectonic unity of aesthetic seeing. And it is this that for the first time creates the possibility for the aesthetic *subiectum* to encompass the entire spatial as well as temporal architectonic through the action of a valuatively unitary affirming and founding self-activity. (Bakhtin, *Philosophy* 66-67; em-

phasis in the original)

Bakhtin widens and enriches the Husserlian concept of the self with his own, "Chalcedonian," formulation[14]: the whole of human creative activity (cognitive as well as artistic) may be seen as a dialectical move back and forth—from (seemingly) "losing" one's self to regaining it in an interaction with the other and with the world as creation.

A further elaboration of the "Bakhtinian self" appears almost simultaneously with "The Author and Hero" in the "Leningrad Lectures" of 1924-25. There, Bakhtin reassesses Kant's philosophy of the subject, distancing himself from Kant's "logic of the horizon," which stipulates that everything one perceives is determined and delimited solely by the subject's own position/perspective. Bakhtin endorses Kant's claim that "one judgment has its life only within the system of other judgments," but criticizes the "relativization" of the self in the first *Critique*, where space and time are posited as categories prior to any experience: "Kant is constantly on the verge of a presentation of space as an object . . . the space of the horizon. [All] he has is the logic of the horizon, i.e., of the *subiectum*" ("Lectures" 216; emphasis in the original).

Dissatisfied with Kant, Bakhtin finds philosophical consolation in Max Scheler's *On the Nature of Sympathy*. Scheler's endeavor in this book is to establish the idea of the Other as an *a priori*, i.e., as an idea that exists and can be intuited independently of experience. In order to demonstrate this, Scheler conceives his own "epistemological Robinson Crusoe," arguing that even if such a Robinson has never come into contact with beings of his kind and has no evidence of their existence, he would nevertheless *intuit* their existence by certain epistemological or emotional "blanks," by experiencing of the lack of response that his actions engender:

> From these necessarily specific and unmistakable blanks . . . where his intentional actions miss their mark, he would . . . derive a most positive intuition and idea of something *present to him as the sphere of the Thou, of which he is merely unacquainted with any particular instance*. (Scheler 235; emphasis in the original)

However, Scheler was aware that the existence of the Other cannot be ascertained if we remain within the cognitive procedures of pure logic (for instance, its analogical thinking), or if we "confine" the other inside the sphere of our emotions. In neither case does the Other exist as a category/entity in itself. Only when one addresses the issue on

the ontological level, can one hope to approach the comprehension of this dynamic.

These insights of Scheler's were likely the most influential for the early years of Bakhtin's philosophical apprenticeship. They provided a strong encouragement for young Bakhtin's pursuit of the appropriate idea of the subject. Scheler's concluding observation that "the primary awareness . . . consists of *patterns of wholeness*" (264; emphasis in the original) influenced the birth of Bakhtin's dialogical subject, that paradoxical holistic and differentiating entity, characterized by a post-romantic concern for the Other, and, as such, carrying this Other within itself.

I shall end here, at the point where Bakhtin's great dialogic narrative begins. A scrupulous voyage through different notions of the self, all of them dependent upon certain *a priori* relationships of the subject (Kant's theory of time and space as *a priori* preconditions for human cognition, Husserl's notions of horizon and surroundings, the Patristic/Chalcedonian dialectics of "divided unity," and Scheler's postulation of the idea of the other *a priori*), enabled Bakhtin to formulate his own inventive idea of the subject. Armed with this idea, he maps the field of his moral philosophy outside the limits of the subject's mind, postulates the concept of aesthetic consummation, and defines literature and culture as an interpenetrating whole. It is my belief that Bakhtin's (seemingly paradoxical) vision of a whole infused with differentiation can prove extremely valuable today. In the same daring way in which it challenged immovable metaphysical conceptions of the human being inherited from the past, it can also provide us with a genuine alternative to some of the self-annihilating conclusions of the postmodern philosophical and sociological critique.

## *Notes*

1. Scheler borrows the passage from O. W. Holmes's *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table.*
2. On Bakhtin's notion of "zhiznennaia ideologiia" see Voloshinov 424-28.
3. The second aspect has not yet been given sufficient attention in Bakhtin scholarship. As I will argue further, the search for the whole and the wholesome is an essential characteristic of Bakhtin's thought.
4. See Nielsen 94.
5. Thus conceived, the notion of "activity" does not appear to have much political potential: indeed, the human capacity that Bakhtin is primarily addressing here is the subject's will. In terms of Bakhtin's ethics of the will, "coming out of the responsibility," which is the realm of theory, is inseparable from "inciting an act," the realm of practice: responsible volitional attitude toward the world is moral activity *par excellence*.

6. Here I give preference to "entering the communion" instead of the rather static, as if already finalized, "being in communion."
7. Where the domain of culture is understood as a network of mutually related acts of human creation, not limited to the artistic sphere.
8. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* this ethically based argumentation concerns the spheres of the natural sciences and technology, whereas in later fragments on epistemology Bakhtin distinguishes between the human sciences and the broad category of "exact knowledge" (Cf. Bakhtin, "Methodology" 160 et passim).
9. Bakhtin faults the Russian Formalists for overvaluing the artistic device and turning it into a self-sufficient principle of the creative processes.
10. It may be argued that the irreconcilable philosophical disagreement between Bakhtin and the Russian Formalists is to be found precisely at this point. While the isolation of a series is a cornerstone in the methodology of early Formalism, for Bakhtin such an isolation is unacceptable; he sees it as one of the reductionisms endemic to abstract theoretical thinking: "The isolated sense/meaning is *contradictio in adjecto*" ("Problem" 260).
11. The oxymoronic phrase "*nesliianno i nerazdel'no*" captures the most essential intuition of Bakhtin's critical genius—the penchant for thinking difference-in-unity and unity-in-difference. This intuition was to inform his entire oeuvre: from the concept of polyphony to the theory of the utterance and the epistemology of the human sciences. (For Bakhtin's rendering of "*asynhytōs, atreptōs, adiairetōs, aboristōs*," the famous formulation of Christ's twofold nature canonized by the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451, see Mihailovic 125-48 and Lock 100 et passim.)
12. The Russian term Bakhtin uses is the neologism "vnenakhodimost'."
13. In "Lectures and Comments of 1924-1925," Bakhtin uses as an example the New Testament parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18.9-14). The Pharisee "incarnate[s] the position of the Third" (which is the transcendental position), and justifies himself in legal terms, whereas the Publican remains "unfinalized" in terms of a formal religion and thus open for the finalizing act of true religious salvation. Among his fragments from the 1940s, we find more of Bakhtin's meditations on self-evaluation: "My body, my face; such feelings I can only usurp from the other" (Bakhtin, *Sobranie* 73; my translation).
14. See endnote 11

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